

A Love Worthy of Testing

Craig Wong, Sermon on Acts 3:21-22, 4:1-13, Grace Fellowship Community Church, February 14, 2016

This morning, I'm going to talk about love...and testing. I know most of you students out there rarely include these two words in the same sentence. I'm going to try, but let's start with "love," shall we? I wish I could say I was an expert on the subject. Valentine's Day is supposedly about love, but frankly, it's a pretty limited. Valentine's Day is that awkward custom in grade school where you ask everyone in your class to be your special valentine while handing out boxes of heart-shaped chalk. We all know that Valentine's Day holds little meaning for anyone other than Hallmark and Victoria Secret shareholders. Not much we learn about love here.

God is Love

One thing we can affirm with biblical authority, however, is that God is love. It is a simple notion that is pretty orthodox to Christianity. Take a loving God out of the equation, and the whole religion pretty much falls apart, yes? So we can assume that God loves us but do we actually believe it? Is it enough to say the words? Is it enough that the Bible tells you so? Or that your pastors at Grace Fellowship tell you so? Or Hillsong tells you. Or your parents when they sang "Jesus loves you this I know" night after night?

I know for me, the concept that "God loves me" can become just that. A concept. An abstraction. Something I know in my head, but can remain disconnected from my heart. Or my hands and feet, for that matter. Perhaps this is just a guy thing, but I wonder if it's something more fundamental. Certainly, Valentine's Day capitalism can be partially blamed for the trivialization of love.

Love is Scary

I wonder if love remains an abstraction for many of us because love is just plain scary. I don't think I'm the only one who struggles with the words, "I love you," because as much as I want to be told that I'm loved, I also resist it, because at the core, I am a profoundly insecure creature. I am not alone. We exist in this room as sons and daughters, husbands and wives, perhaps girlfriends or boyfriends. Questions abound. "You say you love me, but what exactly does that mean?" "How do I know you love me?" "How do I know your eyes won't wander, that you're not grazing in greener pastures?" "Can I really trust you for my well-being?" "Will you still love me tomorrow?"

You see, genuine love is not an abstraction. Genuine love is weighty, risky, palpable. It has the capacity to consume us with joy, but it can also send us into despair. It gets under our skin...hits us in the gut. How we receive love, how we negotiate love, how we trust or distrust the love of another, can be the difference between freedom and paralysis. Hope, or despair. Yes indeed, love IS scary!

The Non-abstract Love of God

But let's see how our text can give us hope. We return to Jesus' baptism. Pastor Sharon preached on this. Remember the genealogy. Remember a Jesus who exists in complete solidarity with a messy humanity. And the fact that He's even baptized along with everyone else. But I also want to call our attention to the earthiness...the deliberateness...the initiative...of God. He OPENS the heavens. He SENDS His Spirit in bodily form, like a dove. He SPEAKS. And He speaks in the most intimate and personal of ways: "You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." There is nothing distant, sterile or abstract about Him!

In our systematic theology class, Patti and I are marveling at the paradox of God, one who inhabits the infinite cosmos and yet is mindful of each person, you and me, down to the number of hairs on our heads. Our readings last week spoke of the paradoxical nature of His love as well. On one hand, God is characterized by agape, or "self-giving love," freely giving without expecting anything in return. On the other hand, God is characterized by – and this surprised me – eros, which is the passion to possess another. Valentine's Day celebrates this very kind of love, so to think of God in this way was a tad jarring. And yet, my mind goes to Song of Solomon, this picture of a bridegroom running after his beloved, or the anger of Yahweh, jealous for His people, and in our text, a Heavenly Father who delights and pleasures in His – possessive pronoun - son. As Thomas Oden puts it, "Although agape and eros seem to be opposites, they come together and flow in balanced simultaneity and support each other's impulses. Both involve a prizing: Love prizes the beloved so earnestly that it cannot rest without its possession (eros), without experiencing the completion of itself in the other. Love prizes the beloved so highly that it does not withhold any feasible gift or service (agape)."

Well I could go on, but these particular attributes of God seemed to jump off the page of this text for me in that we see a picture a Father's love that is not complete apart from the Son's response or appropriation of this love. In other words, it is not enough for Jesus to hear that he is beloved. He must, or should I also say, can, walk in this love. God's love elicits, and makes possible, a response that forms a relational one-ness, a mutuality. And yet, because this love and desire is freely given, there is an inherent vulnerability. I desire you. But I do not force you to desire me back. Therefore, I can lose you. In short, this is a love that by definition will always be tested. It needs to be tested. Or to put it positively, it is a love worthy of testing.

God's Love & Testing

Which is exactly what must happen for Jesus in Chapter 4. No sooner does Jesus get baptized and blessed by the Holy Spirit, He is driven into a harsh and desolate wilderness by that same Spirit, where He will be without food for 40 days to the point of absolute exhaustion. As one preacher wryly put it, if this is how God treats his friends, it's no wonder he has so few of them. However, this wilderness challenge was not some God-concocted obstacle course, like a Survivor for Jesus reality show for celestial entertainment. No, Jesus was driven into the already existing fray of a rebellious creation led by Satan in direct and vehement opposition to God and His purposes. To be about the Father's work meant to engage in a battle of cosmic proportions against an adversary hell-bent on stopping a Messiah from saving the world. Because we've

jumped around Luke, we've already seen how this battle plays out: demon possessions, illness, hardened hearts, religious conspiracy, accusation, deceit, treachery, betrayal, and eventually, capture and Roman-style execution. So this wilderness test is only the beginning, and it is a battle of hearts and minds. When Jesus is at his lowest - and who wouldn't after being without food for 40 days straight - the devil approaches Him and says, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'

You might recognize this as fighting words, yes? "If you say you're a Christian..." It's a simple challenge, really. And one that would be really, really enticing. Some of you know that I went on a 21-day strict vegan diet last month. For me, it was pretty much an exercise in starvation. It wasn't easy eating a soy-based vegan scramble while Ethan sat there with his half-pound bacon cheeseburger with fries. I might as well have been sitting across the table with one of Satan's minions. Jesus had to make a choice at that point. Listen to Satan and indulge in some delicious, fresh-baked sourdough OR...remember and believe His Father's words: "You are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." Notice Jesus' response. Short. Simple. Sunday School lesson material. "One does not live by bread alone." Deuteronomy 8:3. Kids, and adults, this is a good argument for memorizing scripture. When you are being tempted by a voice other than God's, a scripture you've memorized can come to your aid.

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'

In this temptation, it is as if Satan has to get more sophisticated in his approach. His words hint of Psalm 2:8 "Ask of me, and I will make the nations our heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." The devil is offering something that has already been promised, as you might remember the angel telling Mary in Luke 1:32, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and of his kingdom, there will be no end." In other words, Satan is not offering something that Jesus hasn't already been given title to. He only wants to displace God as the benefactor, which would be akin to taking God's place as Jesus' Father. Once again, Jesus must rehearse and live out of his identity as God's beloved Son in this critical moment. He answers him, "It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

So the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, and places him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Notice now what Satan does? He says, "As it is written..." and draws verbatim from Psalm 91 as if speaking the words of God directly. Be warned. Satan can use and twist the scriptures to manipulate the Church toward evil purposes. History bears witness to this. Thus, while it is good to memorize scriptures, it's also important that we seek to *understand* them.

So Jesus answers Satan a third time, this time quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Now this last temptation is worth a closer look. Take note of the setting. The devil leads Jesus to the highest point on the Temple in Jerusalem. You'll remember in Luke 13 how Jesus cries out, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Almost as though anticipating this, Satan offers Jesus an idea for a quick sell. They're not going to take you seriously unless you do something really big. Really convincing. Show them what the big man upstairs can really do! What Satan is offering Jesus at this juncture is what one bible commentator called, "A cross-avoiding spectacle." This perhaps is one of Satan's most insidious strategies: to entice you to do pursue godly goals, or even just good things, but not on God's terms. You see, the genius of Satan's temptations is that they don't require a lot of arm-twisting. The problem is that they make sense. They're reasonable. They feel justifiable. "Are you not a child of God? Would He not want you to have these things? Accomplish these things? Win these people?"

The "Sensibleness" of Satan

For me, pondering these temptations went a long way in explaining the popularity of Donald Trump. For many, including myself, his popularity has been a head-scratcher. But if you think about it from the perspective of Luke 4, his message is very compelling. You're feeling financially vulnerable? No problem! Everything I touch turns to gold! ISIS freaking you out? No problem, I've spent my entire career taking down my enemies. Worried that the United States is losing her luster on the world stage? No problem, I am the master of the sensational. Look at this! No one draws a crowd like me!

You see, the power of temptation is in its subtlety. In the way that it resonates with our sense of things. It was this way for Jesus in the wilderness. It is no different for us. But the good news is that we see in Luke 4 that Jesus had all that He needed. He had the love and presence of His heavenly Father, and the words of the Father that had been entrusted to Him. He knew that He could trust His Father for His well-being, even in the direst of circumstances. He did not have to betray His Father to get His needs met. He could set His face to Jerusalem, to carry out His Father's business. He could heal the sick, give sight to the blind, proclaim the good news, and forebear a group of very fickle and thick-headed disciples. He could go to the cross, for the joy set before Him.

Lent as a Gift of Testing

Brothers and sisters, this is our journey too. It is why we have the season of Lent. Lent reminds us that as daunting as the path of Jesus might seem, it is the only path that gives us life, where true joy can be found. Every other path is death. It is the season where we can deliberately practice "giving what we cannot keep to gain what we cannot lose" as Doug offered us on Ash Wednesday. Lent offers us the "gift of testing," a time to recognize those places where we are tempted to seek our life in things other than God, to look Satan squarely in the eye, and say, "I shall worship my God and serve Him only."

In closing, I want to offer a thought, a Lenten suggestion if you will. I know that it is customary for some to choose something you like, for example, chocolate or meat, coffee, or some other border-line addiction, as a way to practice self-denial, as a way to be pointed to God. There can be great value in this, so I'm not at all suggesting otherwise. But I wonder if such Lenten practices can also remain a mere abstraction in the same way that God's love can be an abstraction.

You see, the reality is that we never have to look for tests. We don't have to find a wilderness to open up opportunities for practicing self-denial. The truth is, the cosmic battle we looked at earlier rages on to this day, and it rages all around us. Perhaps more importantly, it rages within, the battle lines drawn right down the center of each human heart. Every human heart, that is, that seeks to walk the narrow path of God. If you find yourself complacent and comfortable, if you've made your bed with self-indulgence, lust, pride, arrogance, or bitterness against a brother or sister, then the devil has you exactly where he wants you, because he knows that it's much harder to give up bitterness than to give up chocolate or meat. Satan has much bigger fish to fry.

But if you are seeking to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, then you will find good company with the Apostle Paul who agonizes about the conflict that rages within him, doing things he ought not to do, and failing to do the things he knows he ought to do. For Paul, evil lies close at hand. What he says is true. For each one of us. Every moment of every day. Whether we care to see it or not.

And so my Lenten suggestion is this. Create a space daily to recognize the evil that lies close at hand for you. Ask the Spirit to reveal it to you. Perhaps like Jesus in the wilderness, you are tired. Your resources have been depleted. You have reached the end. You just want some relief. You want to get away. Maybe your co-workers all look like either enemies or buffoons. Maybe one of them is becoming dangerously attractive. Your marriage is toxic. Your husband is driving you crazy. Your family is spiraling out of control. You want to punch your sister. You don't want to face someone in this room. Maybe you're finding yourself just plain jaded about church. You're stewing in resentment and self-righteousness, and enjoying its juices. Or maybe someone you really care about is struggling, hurting, dying. You receive bad news about your own health. Maybe you've failed miserably. Or perhaps you are wildly succeeding. In whatever circumstance you find yourself, you have a choice to make. How are you being tempted? How will you respond? Will you trust in God, or in something or someone other than Him?

The Fruit of Testing

I want to leave you with this. Such testing is a gift. During this season of Lent, as the Spirit leads you through the wilderness, you are given daily opportunities to choose life over death...to turn to God, die to your sin, and send the devil on his way. And with each and every time you do this, your faith will be strengthened. Testing is a gift. Testing matures us. Testing deepens your relationship with God. You will discover and experience, step by step along the way, just how truly beloved in Christ you are, that His is indeed a love worthy of testing.

Brothers and sisters, secure in the love of God, let us be about the Father's business, proclaiming hope to a city filled with 800,000 wandering souls in desperate need of love.